

Hokianga Accord Update #34

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More or less kahawai

Recently the Ministry of Fisheries issued new management proposals for kahawai. There are several options and interested parties have been asked to provide their input by 13 August. The Hokianga Accord will be working with its Alliance coalition of environmental and fishing partners to develop a response. Ultimately the goal is to ensure 'more fish in the water' so all New Zealanders can provide for their social, economic and cultural well-being.

After four years of Court battles these proposals are an interesting, and at times encouraging, reflection of the outcome of the Kahawai Legal Challenge. The Hokianga Accord was fully supportive of the Challenge that occurred from 2005 to 2009 because kahawai have always been a taonga [treasure]. Kahawai remain valuable as food, and prized for their social and cultural value.

Kahawai have sustained our whanau for generations. Many years ago there were annual migrations of inland tribes to the coast to harvest, dry and store kahawai for the coming winter months. In exchange for hosting these clans coastal communities received forest and inland delicacies that were not readily available on the fringes of Aotearoa.

In later years families would spend a weekend at the beach gathering kaimoana and teaching their younger ones the correct way [tikanga] when harvesting particular species. Treating the catch with respect and delivering the best fish to housebound elders on the way home was all part of the learning experience.

When kahawai were plentiful they could easily be caught from the beach and off the rocky headlands. An approaching flock of diving, screaming terns was a sure sign of exciting and productive times ahead.

But since the advent of industrial, bulk-harvesting purse seine methods many of our traditional fishing grounds have become depleted. And it is no accident that health issues associated with poor diet are now common amongst Maori and Pacific people.

Our kahawai and our people have become the victims of a thriving crayfish industry in Australia that demands immense volumes of cheap, hardy bait.

So it is encouraging to read the MFish discussion on interdependent species and the important ecological relationship kahawai have with some seabirds and possibly marine mammals. This is something our fisheries managers have paid lip service to in the past.

Experienced fishermen have long argued there are not as many seabirds as there was when kahawai were driving schools of pilchards, anchovies and whitebait to the sea surface.

Managing our kahawai stocks at higher targets will enable these natural interactions to thrive and hopefully restore our seabird and mammal populations to previous abundance levels.

When deciding on future kahawai management the Minister of Fisheries needs to be cautious and consider both the highly uncertain information and the unavoidable bycatch taken by commercial fishers. These fish are and will be caught so they need to be accounted for in the overall catch limits.

After all the court rumblings the Minister, Phil Heatley, and his Ministry now have the opportunity to elevate their credibility by protecting our humble kahawai. Let's hope for our children's sake they have the legs to do it.

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